

British Columbian Wines

British Columbia, for those not familiar with the place, is Canada's western most province and home to Canada's second winegrowing region. The Niagara peninsula at Niagara Falls, Ontario, is the oldest and currently most successful winegrowing region in Canada. But the Niagara peninsula is a very tiny viticultural area, however, limited geographically to a small production, so in the 1950's adventurous grape growers in the comparatively large Okanagan Valley in south-central B.C planted the first large-scale commercial vineyards to satisfy the potential Canadian market demand for indigenous wine.

At that time a different philosophy about viticulture held sway. Experts in the field of viticulture, many trained at California's U.C. Davis school, gave recommendations that the cold winters and shorter growing seasons of moderate climate regions like the Okanagan Valley, or eastern Washington, or western Oregon, would not be suitable for growing the European species of winegrapes *Vitis vinifera*, but only for native North American species *Vitis labrusca* or hybrid varieties. This advice turned out to be dead wrong, reflecting a hot-climate, big-yield mentality that was native to California at the time. So on this bad advice growers in the Pacific Northwest, including B.C., planted poor-quality grape varieties that would produce wines that would have a distinct disadvantage in the marketplace.

The provincial government in B.C. further exacerbated the problem by enacting extremely liberal product labelling requirements that allowed such things as the inclusion of up to 15% water to any wine "product". The table was set for B.C. wine producers to produce oceans of poor-quality wines, with no emphasis on premium wine. Furthermore, protectionist pricing policies at Provincial Government monopoly liquor stores kept prices of imported wine unnaturally high, giving no incentive to local producers to improve quality.

The wines of B.C. wineries in the late seventies and early eighties, despite having over twenty years of experience, were still simply horrible, trashy and flavorless concoctions barely recognizable as wine. The average B.C. wine was a sweet, dull, flavorless chemical soup made from overburdened hybrid grapes and water, dressed in cheesy packaging that inevitable bore some Gallic or Germanic brandname written in garish gothic script. The state of the B.C. wine industry was much like the U.S./Canadian auto industry of the same time, which enjoyed similar protectionist measures against Japanese imported cars. The cars made in the North America at the time were simply terrible: outdated technologically, poor quality, and not what the consumer demanded.

When, under the Reagan administration, the U.S. removed its import quotas in Japanese cars, the North American auto industry was forced to respond to market demands and produce vehicles that are today, right up to world quality standards.

Likewise when the 1991 G.A.T.T. agreement was signed by Canada and then the subsequent N.A.F.T.A. treaty, things began to take a turn for the better.

To appease growers that felt betrayed by this move toward free trade, the B.C. government began a program to pay for growers to tear up hybrid grapevines. They also instituted a new system called the Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) that held member producers accountable to comparatively rigorous standards.

Today, B.C. wineries are starting to be known more for their quality table wines rather than the cheap jug wines that were the industry standard. Even the inexpensive wines have improved, as they are made largely from Californian musts or blends of imported bulk-wines.

B.C. still has a long way to go, as a true identity for the Okanagan Valley as a wine producing region has yet to emerge. Pressure from two fledgling winegrowing regions in B.C., the Fraser Valley near Vancouver, and the Esquimalt peninsula near Victoria, may help to further accelerate an identity for B.C. wines.

The lesson to be learned from this forty year span that produced millions of hectoliters of overpriced swill, and rotted the livers and palates of several generations of British Columbians, is that the marketplace must be driven by the free choice of consumers, rather than consumers being at the mercy of an alliance of bureaucrats and cutthroats.

- Tom Davis, Vancouver, Canada